The Washington Merry-Go-Round

Nixon Aimed to Counter Wallace

By Drew Pearson

What Richard Nixon was doing during the last hectic hours at the Republican Convention in Miami Beach was developing Sen. Strom Thurmond, the South Carolina renegade Democrat, as his agent to combat another renegade Democrat, George Wallace of Alabama.

This is why he gave Thurmond the veto on who would run as Vice President, and why he picked Gov. Spiro Agnew of Maryland, almost unknown to most Republicans, for the No. 2 place on the ticket.

It was a calculated risk. Nixon knew he would antagonize many Northern Republicans, though he was not prepared for as much smoldering resentment as that which immediately swept over Northern delegations.

But he figured that with Strom Thurmond, together with Sen. John Tower of Texas,, another Southern Republican, he could combat his biggest threat below the Mason-Dixon Line—Wallace.

Actually, Sen. Thurmond did a great job for Nixon behind the scenes in Miami Beach. No sooner had Southern delegates arrived than a revolt developed in favor of Ronald Reagan. Both Rockefeller and Reagan were counting on this to pull enough votes away from Nixon to stop him on the second and third ballots, and an eventual Nixon defeat.

But they didn't figure on Strom Thurmond. Though Strom started out as a strong Reagan man, a talk with Nixon converted him into Nixon's and he became Nixon's agent with Southern delegates. To that end he took the rebellious Mississippi delegates on a cruise Monday afternoon on a private yacht loaned to Nixon.

He also helped arrange the secret Nixon conference with Southern delegates at which Nixon threw cold water on school bussing, promised to appoint Supreme Court justices who could stick with the Constitution, not make laws on their own.

Vice Presidential Veto

In return, Nixon agreed to veto four vice presidential candidates who were anathema to the South: Sen. Ed Brooke, the Negro from Massachusetts; John Lindsay, Mayor of New York; Sen. Mark Hatfield of Oregon; and Charles Percy of Illinois.

Actually, Thurmond was not too happy about Nixon's final choice of Agnew, but agreed that Agnew would not antagonize the South. Agnew had been elected Governor of Maryland as a defender of open housing. However, he took a strong stand against the Negro sit-in at Bowie State College, and called on Negro leaders to read the riot act to militants after the April burnings in Baltimore. About 100 Negro moderates walked out. So Thurmond agreed that Agnew would not antagonize the South.

Nixon's mistake, however, was in not consulting the moderates. He consulted the South but forgot the moderates. They were sore, not so much at the choice of Agnew, a fellow moderate, but at not being consulted.

Whether Nixon's calculated risk in working with Thurmond will pay off now remains to be seen. The two men have known and liked each other ever since the Eisenhower Administration when Nixon presided over the Senate. Thurmond, as Governor of South Carolina, had bolted the Democratic Party in 1948 to form a third Party against Harry Truman after Hubert Humphrey, then Mayor of Minneapolis, had forced a showdown on civil rights.

Though Humphrey won the civil rights battle, the entire South walked out of the convention, and a majority of the South voted for Strom Thurmond's third Party that fall. This is one reason Nixon figured he could combat the Wallace third Party movement this fall—20 years later.

A Lonely Senator

But ever since he bolted the Democratic Party, Thurmond has been a lonely figure in the Senate. He is charming, likeable, a regular attendant at prayer breakfasts. But as a Republican he is no longer welcome among Southern Senators, and moderate Republican Senators don't quite trust his politics. In fact, Republicans fumed when Thurmond was appointed to the Republican Policy Committee. For a time, Sen. Richard Russell, the elder statesman from Georgia, was not enthusiastic about having Strom on his Armed Services Committee.

One aspect of Thurmond's career which fellow Senators are skeptical about is his very close ties with the right wing military, including retired Gen. Edwin Walker, who was transferred from Germany after he indoctrinated his troops with some of the teachings of the John Birch Society. Thurmond, a major general in the Army Reserve, was one of Walker's champions.

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